

ALBERT ARNOLD GORE, JR.
45th Vice President: 1993-2001

“I’ve defined my job in exactly the same way for six years now: to do everything I can to help him be the best president possible.”

–Vice President Al Gore at the time of the President Clinton’s impeachment.



Senator Al Gore opened his acceptance speech for the vice-presidential nomination at the 1992 Democratic convention in New York by reflecting that he had dreamed of this moment since he was a boy, growing up in Tennessee: “That one day I’d have the chance to come here to Madison Square Garden and be the warm-up act for Elvis.” His self-deprecating humor worked on multiple levels. It poked fun at the seeming inevitability of his own rise to national political prominence, and acknowledged that top billing on the ticket had gone not to him but to the new Elvis, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. Gore continued the comparison: “I’m told that Hope, Arkansas, is a lot like my hometown of Carthage, Tennessee: It’s a place where people know about it when you’re born and care about it when you die.” Yet Gore had been born in Washington, D.C., and only sporadically lived in Carthage. Being the son of a United States senator gave him many advantages, but it also forced him to find ways to establish his own identity.¹

Named Albert Arnold after his father, Gore used “Junior” while running for the House and the

Senate, but dropped it when he first campaigned for president, at the age of thirty-nine, to avoid emphasizing his youth. Four years later, when Gore ran for vice president, Michael Kelly wrote in the *New York Times* that his press office was firm on the point: “The Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee is Al Gore, not Al Gore, Jr. It is a small thing, the missing Jr., but it matters. Albert Gore, Jr. is that interesting creation, the son of a famous, extraordinary man.” On the differences between Senior and Junior, Tennessee Senator James Sasser, a family friend, commented: “Old Albert was sort of ‘up by the bootstraps,’ but Young Albert had the advantages that a Senator can give his son.” Later, when Vice President Al Gore spearheaded an ambitious effort to “reinvent” the federal government, it seemed a fitting metaphor for a man who spent so much of his political career reinventing himself. The *Washington Post* later commented that for much of his distinguished career, “the nation has watched Mr. Gore in a private search for his public persona, or maybe a public search for a private persona; by now it’s hard to tell which.”²

Frighteningly Good at Many Things

The senior Albert Gore had attended a one-room school in Possum Hollow, Tennessee, worked his way through college, studied law at night at Nashville’s YMCA Law School, and married a fellow law student, Pauline LaFon. Gore settled in Carthage, a small town forty miles northeast of Nashville, and was elected as the county’s superintendent of education while still a law student. In 1938 he won election to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he stood out as an independent thinker, willing to buck prevailing sentiments. In the 1952 Democratic primary he challenged the powerful incumbent Senator Kenneth McKellar. “Thinking Feller, Vote for McKellar,” had been the senator’s campaign slogan. “Think Some

More: Vote for Gore,” the challenger responded. That message helped send Albert Gore, Sr. to the Senate.³

Senator Gore won national attention by sponsoring legislation that led to the construction of the national interstate highway system, and by being one of the few southern senators to vote for civil rights legislation. As a liberal southerner, Gore might have balanced a national party ticket, except for competition from Tennessee’s other senator, Estes Kefauver. At the 1956 convention, presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson allowed the delegates to choose his running mate. Gore and Kefauver jumped into the race, as did Massachusetts’ young Senator John F. Kennedy. When Kennedy pulled ahead, Gore threw his support to Kefauver, who took the nomination. Kennedy spent the next four years thanking the delegates who voted him off the losing ticket in 1956 and thereby preserved his chances of winning the next presidential nomination. In 1960, Albert Gore also pondered a race for president. Looking over the field of potential candidates, he felt he could do as well as any of them. To gain experience in foreign relations, he made several trips overseas, stopping in South Vietnam, where he developed his first doubts about American policies in Indochina.⁴

In this atmosphere of national politics and international affairs, Al Gore, Jr. was born on March 31, 1948, during a congressional session. The Gore family, which also included his older sister Nancy, moved into an apartment at the Fairfax Hotel on Massachusetts Avenue. As soon as school let out in Washington, young Al eagerly looked forward to spending the summer at the family farm on the Caney Fork River near Carthage. “If you’re a boy, and if you have the choice between the eighth-floor of a hotel and a big farm with horses, cows, canoes, and a river,” he recalled, “it was an easy choice for me.” The

senator always had long lists of chores for his son. Once he sent young Al to plow down a steep slope, and Pauline Gore objected that it was too dangerous. When the senator insisted that their son was up to it, she replied disapprovingly: “Yes, a boy could never be president if he couldn’t plow with that damned hillside plow.”⁵

When Al Gore was selected for vice president, his father said proudly: “Well, we raised him for it.” Confronted with that remark, Gore responded, “When I was growing up, I don’t ever remember a time when either of my parents said: ‘Don’t you want to go into politics?’” Spoken or not, his parents held great expectations for him. Young Al frequented his father’s Senate office and once sat on Vice President Richard Nixon’s lap. On another occasion he eavesdropped (with parental permission) on a telephone call to his father from President John Kennedy. Down on the farm there were often political and diplomatic visitors. Al Gore learned the family business early by campaigning for his father’s reelection in 1958 and 1964, putting up posters, shaking hands, and “doing everything a kid can do.”⁶

When Congress was not in session, Gore went to public school in Carthage. Otherwise, he attended private school in Washington. At St. Albans School for Boys on the grounds of the Washington National Cathedral, he earned favorable notice, as captured in his yearbook entry: “Al is frighteningly good at many things. Perhaps it is more truthful to say he is excellent at almost everything he does (which in turn is a considerable amount). Varsity football, Capital, basketball and track standout. Liberal party Leader in Government class, scholar, artist extraordinary. Al has stood out in many fields of endeavor. Popular and well-respected, he would seem the epitome of the All-American Young Man.”⁷

Going on to Harvard, he majored in government and wrote a thesis on the impact of television on

the American presidency. A seminar on “Problems of Advanced Industrial Society” introduced him to its teacher, Martin Peretz, who as the publisher of *The New Republic* would later promote Gore’s political advancement. His college years corresponded with the Vietnam War, against which his father had become a vocal national critic. At graduation in 1969, a low draft number assured that he would be called up soon. “The draft board was breathing down his neck,” his father recalled. “He sat around with his mother and I in the living room and talked about it. He said he didn’t believe in the Vietnam War. I said, ‘Well, it isn’t given in our law for an individual to go contrary to the law.’ We discussed all the various things young men were doing to dodge the draft.” His mother said that she would support whatever he wanted to do—“including going to Canada with him.”⁸

The war highlighted Al Gore’s two worlds. Most classmates at Harvard evaded the draft, but he was registered at a small town draft board, which meant that if he did not go someone else from Carthage would be called in his place. Nor could he escape the impact his decision could have on his father’s political career. Albert Gore, Sr. faced a strong Republican challenge in 1970. Shifting away from its New Deal mooring, Tennessee had elected a Republican Senator, Howard Baker, in 1966. President Richard Nixon considered Gore’s defeat as an important step in his “Southern strategy.” Gore’s opponent, Bill Brock, made the war a major campaign issue. The younger Gore concluded that the best way to help the antiwar movement was to help his father get reelected, and the way to do that was to enlist in the U.S. Army. He appeared in uniform in his father’s campaign commercials, one of which ended with the senator advising: “Son, always love your country.”⁹

Yet the voters turned the senator out of office. Gore, Sr. attributed his loss to the backlash from

racial issues and the Great Society's economic policies, but he had also suffered from accusations that he had lost touch with the state and "gone Washington." Campaigning in Tennessee, Vice President Spiro Agnew had labeled him the "Southern regional chairman of the eastern establishment." In his concession speech, Gore looked to a future in which his party would overcome the racial politics of the past and provide "vigorous new progressive leadership." He had his son in mind.¹⁰

Whatever his father wanted, Al Gore thought "politics was the absolute last thing I would ever do." In May 1970 he married Mary Elizabeth "Tipper" Aitcheson, whom he had met at a party at St. Albans, while she was attending St. Agnes (and playing the drums for a rock group called "The Wildcats"). "He had such a serious outlook toward life, always talking about issues and the future," she later commented. "Most seventeen-year-olds just don't talk about those things." At their wedding in Washington's National Cathedral, St. Alban's headmaster officiated, and the organist played a Beatles medley.¹¹

Gore spent six months in Vietnam as an army journalist, and returned dispirited. Rather than go to law school, as his lawyer parents had hoped, he attended divinity school at Vanderbilt, which Tipper Gore described as an act of "purification." Gore also worked the night shift for the *Nashville Tennessean*, whose editor John Seigenthaler was an old friend of his father's. He showed a knack for investigative reporting. "I began to think I had a talent, I could make a contribution," he marveled. "It released a source of energy I didn't know I had." It frustrated him, however, that a journalist could only expose wrongdoing without being able to correct it. That realization led to a leave of absence from the paper to try law school. Before he could finish, he learned that his local congressman planned to retire in 1976.¹²

Gore's abrupt decision to run for the open seat surprised even himself. "I didn't realize myself I

had been pulled back so much to it,” he later commented. The news came as a “bombshell” to his wife. Tipper Gore held a job in the *Tennessean*’s photo lab and was working on a master’s degree in psychology, but she joined in her husband’s campaign (with assurance that she could get her job at the *Tennessean* back if he lost). By contrast, Gore asked his father to stay out of his campaign. “I must become my own man,” he explained. “I must not be your candidate.” Even without his father’s electioneering, Gore had the asset of his famous name and the weight of his father’s liberal voting record, which other candidates in the crowded Democratic primary repeatedly used against him. He defined himself as a pragmatic moderate.¹³

As a candidate, Al Gore adopted a slow and measured form of speech. Friends who had seen him in relaxed and casual moments assumed that he employed this style to minimize his youthfulness, but it also reflected Gore’s unease as a public speaker. Unlike his oratorically gifted father, he expressed himself more comfortably in writing than in speaking. “I think in his own mind he had more bent for journalism than law,” his mother commented. “He’d always loved writing. I never heard him make a speech when he was in school.”¹⁴

An Atari Democrat

Narrowly winning the nine-candidate primary, Al Gore faced no Republican opponent in the November election. At twenty-eight, he returned to Washington as a member of Congress, and had to decide whether to raise his own family in Washington or Tennessee. Pauline Gore advised her daughter-in-law to relinquish her job and follow her husband: “You grow together. And he’ll have experiences that you should participate in.” They bought the Tudor-style house in Arlington, Virginia, that Tipper’s

grandfather had built and where she had spent her childhood after her parents divorced. “So there I was,” she reflected, “with three young children and a hardworking husband who spent three out of every four weekends back in Tennessee with his constituents—a pattern he continued the whole time he was in Congress.” Mindful of the criticism that his father had lost touch with his state, Gore held some twelve hundred district meetings in his eight years in the House of Representatives.¹⁵

Democrats had a 292-143 majority in the House after the 1976 election. A freshman in such a large majority would have few chances to get much attention outside of his own district. Yet Gore impressed other members with his imaginative mind and aggressive pursuit of issues and publicity. Congressional oversight served as an extension of his past investigative reporting—with subpoena power. He sponsored legislation to create a “Superfund” for toxic waste cleanup, and to toughen the warnings on cigarette packs (a risky move for a representative from a big tobacco state). He became the first member to speak on television from the House chamber. “I like to examine issues with finite answers,” he commented. “That’s where I’m most comfortable.”¹⁶

In 1980, when Gore joined the House Intelligence Committee, he noticed that his constituents were asking more questions about nuclear arms at district meetings. At a Girls’ State meeting in Murfreesboro, he asked how many thought there would be a nuclear war in their lifetime, and was stunned when most of the girls raised their hands. Gore returned to Washington and began to investigate arms control issues. By the spring of 1982 he attracted international attention with a “Gore Plan” to reduce chances of a nuclear first strike by cutting multiple warheads and deploying single-warhead mobile launchers. He was pleased that the Reagan administration adopted some of his ideas in arms negotiations with the Soviet Union.¹⁷

During his eight years in the House, Gore established an impressive list of accomplishments and was poised to run for the Senate to replace the retiring Howard Baker in 1984. He survived Ronald Reagan's landslide reelection victory that year and easily beat his Republican opponent, Victor Ashe, but his triumph was marred by the death of his sister Nancy from lung cancer. As senator, Gore drew committee assignments on Commerce, Governmental Affairs, and Rules and Administration, and when Democrats regained the Senate majority in 1986, he left Governmental Affairs to join the Armed Services Committee. Along with his predecessor, Howard Baker, he advocated the televising of Senate proceedings, which finally occurred in 1986. Gore carefully chose his issues. Texas Democratic Senator Lloyd Bentsen described him as a "very serious person," who thoroughly studied the issues. Gore's passion for technological issues, from biomedical research and genetic engineering to the environmental impact of the "greenhouse effect," linked him with other technophiles on Capitol Hill known as "Atari Democrats."¹⁸

Unexpectedly, it was Tipper Gore who first gained national notoriety. When her eleven-year-old daughter brought home a new music recording in 1985, Tipper was shocked by its pornographic lyrics. She organized the Parents' Music Resource Center as a consumer movement to convince the record industry to adopt voluntary warning labels for violence, profanity, and sexually explicit lyrics. In September 1985, she testified before the Senate Commerce Committee, and extensive media coverage of the hearing made her a household name. She extended her crusade through a book on *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Opponents in the music industry assailed her as a puritan trampling on civil liberties, raising concerns about the possible repercussions on her husband's political career. As Senator Gore readied for

his first presidential campaign, he and Tipper traveled to Hollywood to meet with recording industry executives. Denying any interest in censorship, they apologized for having “sent the wrong message.” Their next goal, Tipper Gore joked, was to get her husband’s “name recognition up to mine.”¹⁹

First Presidential Campaign

As the 1988 presidential election approached, Al Gore declared his candidacy as a moderate Democrat from the “New South.” Not yet forty, and serving in his first term in the Senate, he seemed a more likely choice for vice president, but he insisted he was not interested in the second spot. His father, about to turn eighty, was anxious to see him become president, and around Christmas 1986 urged his son to make the race. Gore deliberated for six months. His parents became convinced that he would not run, until he called to say, “Dad, it’s a go.” The old senator let out a war whoop.²⁰

Washington Post congressional reporter Helen Dewar compared Gore’s “cerebral, analytical, cautious” approach to politics to his father’s “more romantic, passionate liberalism.” Gore took relatively nonideological stands and spoke on such unusually “futuristic” issues as the environment and digital technology. Standing in front of the red brick courthouse in Carthage, Tennessee, he declared his candidacy as someone who could provide leadership for a “young and eager and restless nation.” Gore reminded Democrats of their poor track record in recent presidential elections, and he called on the party to “return to its traditional support of a strong national defense to protect the national security.” When he tried to promote his environmental ideas, the conservative columnist George F. Will ridiculed them as “not even peripheral.” Gore backed away from those issues and campaigned instead as a “raging moderate.” The liberal journalist Sidney Blumenthal took this as a sign of Gore’s excessive sensitivity to “the prevailing

opinion-making elites, having grown up among them.’²¹

In the Super Tuesday primary, Gore won six: Arkansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Nevada, and Tennessee. Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis won seven states, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson five. By avoiding the earlier contests and concentrating on the South, Gore had made himself the “Southern candidate.” He still needed to establish himself as a national leader. “I really thought that if I could get the spotlight, I could convince people, in whatever region of the country or whatever age group, that I was a person they wanted to vote for,” Gore later explained, but the veteran journalists Jack Germond and Jules Witcover noted that “when he did get the spotlight, Ed Koch was the one doing the talking.”²²

New York City’s volatile Mayor Ed Koch reacted angrily to Jesse Jackson’s support for the Palestinian cause. Since Gore had been willing to confront Jackson on that issue, Koch endorsed him. While Gore sought the middle ground, however, Koch tended to polarize the electorate. The mayor dominated campaign stops and kept the presidential candidate in the background. New Yorkers were growing tired of the mayor, who would lose his next race for renomination, so Koch’s endorsement backfired in favor of Dukakis. The Massachusetts governor won the New York Democratic primary with 51 percent to Jackson’s 37 percent and Gore’s 10 percent, effectively ending Gore’s presidential campaign.²³

A Family Trauma

Al Gore paid back his campaign debt, hired a speech consultant, and found a dance coach to help him move more fluidly. Loosening up, he remarked to a crowd of well-wishers in Tennessee: “Hello, I’m

Al Gore, I used to be your next president.” Gore puzzled over why criticism of his environmental issues had made him doubt his own political judgment during the campaign, and chose to return to his fundamental interests by authoring the World Environmental Policy Act of 1989. He also joined a bipartisan group to create the first Interparliamentary Conference on the Global Environment in 1990. Environmental interests took him from Antarctica to the Amazonian rain forests.²⁴

Then all of these issues took second place to a horrifying personal blow. In April 1989, the Gore family attended the Baltimore Orioles’ opening day game. Leaving the stadium, six-year-old Albert Gore III broke away from his father’s grip and darted into the street. A car struck him and threw him into the air, leaving him broken and bloody. “Albert’s accident stopped us cold,” Tipper Gore recorded. They stayed with their son until his release from the hospital, and spent the next two years helping to restore his body and spirit.²⁵

Although the accident received extensive media coverage, the Gore family treated it as a private crisis. They declined invitations to appear on television to talk about it, or to give an interview for a cover story on *People* Magazine. As his son recovered, Gore returned to political pursuits and won a landslide election to a second term in the Senate in 1990. He also started writing a book on the environment. Late one night he wrote an introductory passage about his son’s accident. “The words finally broke through and came through my fingers out of the keys. I could not control the emotion,” he wrote. “I mean, I was just sobbing as I was putting it, as the words were finally falling out of me. And it was one of the most intense and moving experiences I ever had in finally allowing myself to put that into words.” Finally able to communicate publicly what the experience had meant to him, Gore noted with astonishment how many

people around the Senate—janitors, secretaries, and elevator operators—had gone out of their way to express concern. He believed that the sympathy of others shattered barriers inside him.²⁶

Gore found himself “increasingly impatient with the status quo, with conventional wisdom, with the lazy assumptions that we can always muddle through.” Complacency about the environment had led to deteriorating global conditions that threatened disaster, he wrote. “We must all become partners in a bold effort to change the foundation of our civilization.” His emotional release breathed life into *Earth in the Balance*, the first book by a sitting senator to make the *New York Times* best-seller list since John F. Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*. “I won’t say I didn’t harbor that hope in my wildest dreams,” he said. “I put my whole heart and soul into this.” His month-long book tour resembled a political campaign, but Gore announced that he would not be a candidate again in 1992. It was too soon after the accident to subject his family to another national campaign.²⁷

Like Gore, other prominent Democrats chose not to run, on the assumption that the incumbent was unbeatable. In 1991, President George H. W. Bush had sent American troops into combat to drive invading Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. The swift victory gave Bush astronomically high approval ratings. The Persian Gulf War also boosted Gore’s standing, since he had bolted from his party’s leadership to become one of ten Democratic senators to support the war resolution, which had passed 52 to 47. Gore had hoped that sanctions would work, but once the president had sent 400,000 troops, he “couldn’t vote to pull the plug.”²⁸

Gore’s absence from the primaries benefitted another “New South” candidate, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, who campaigned successfully on the issues of economic recovery and health care, overcoming

questions about his personal morality. Clinton's top choices for vice president were all U.S. senators—and of them, Gore's strengths most balanced Clinton's weaknesses. Gore had served in Vietnam and voted for the Gulf war, had an impeccable personal life and years of experience on Capitol Hill. When interviewed about the vice presidency, Gore seemed reluctant and said he would "have to think about it for a long time." In June 1992, Gore traveled to Rio de Janeiro as a Senate delegate to the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development. His opposition to the Bush administration's position on global warming, which he considered out of step with the rest of the conference, convinced him to accept Clinton's offer to join the ticket.²⁹

It was an unconventional selection for vice president. Instead of balancing the ticket geographically, ideologically, or generationally, Clinton and Gore mirrored each other. Close in age, they came from contiguous states and claimed centrist positions on most issues. Despite the lack of diversity, the choice enabled Clinton to make generational change a major theme of his campaign.³⁰

The Clinton-Gore team enjoyed a spectacular "bounce" in the polls after the Democratic convention and their popular bus tours of the country. The economic recession put the incumbent Bush-Quayle ticket on the defensive. Ross Perot's campaign also appealed to voter groups that would otherwise have supported Bush. In October, Gore debated Vice President Dan Quayle and Perot's running-mate, Admiral James Stockdale. Gore and Quayle had served together in the House and Senate, served on the Senate Armed Services Committee together, and played basketball together in the House gym—where Gore conceded that Quayle had a better jump shot. Quayle's aggressive debating style made Gore look "steady, stolid and smooth." Gore relaxed noticeably throughout the rest of the campaign. On election night the

Democratic ticket prevailed by 43 percent to Bush's 38 percent and Perot's 19 percent.³¹

Reinventing Government

Gore's father advised him to make sure he had a clear understanding of what his role as vice president would be. In November, Gore met with Clinton in Little Rock to hammer out a two-page agreement outlining their relationship. Clinton committed himself to regular lunch meetings, recognized Gore as a principal adviser on nominations, and appointed some of Gore's chief advisers to key White House staff positions. Gore knew that Hillary Rodham Clinton would play a unique role in this administration, and he had some anxious moments when an idea floated to give her the vice president's office in the West Wing and move him to the Old Executive Office Building. Gore managed to reclaim the "Square Office" down the corridor from the Oval Office, close enough for regular consultation with the president. Rather than competition, a sense of collaboration developed between the president, his wife, and his vice president, whom the political scientist James MacGregor Burns identified as the "troika" that led the Clinton administration.³²

Clinton involved Gore in decision making to an unprecedented degree for a vice president. Through their weekly lunches and daily conversations, Gore became the president's "indisputable chief adviser." Close observers considered Gore more disciplined than Clinton. "Gore stays on schedule and deliberates but does not dawdle over decisions," wrote *New York Times* reporter Richard Berke. "Clinton likes people around him. Gore cherishes solitude." The vice president was reserved, the president outgoing. Tipper Gore felt closer in temperament with the president, with whom she shared a birthday. Both were gregarious, energized by being around people, and shared a similar sense of humor. On one

occasion, Hillary Clinton joked to Al Gore: “Oh, we’re the serious, stiff ones, stuck over here in a corner, while the two of them are out there making everybody laugh.” The two couples invited each other to private dinners and kept in regular contact. The vice presidency restored predictability to the Gores’ family life. Unlike his Senate years, when he never knew when he would be back for dinner, Gore came home more regularly in the evenings and traveled less on weekends. The Gores learned to cope with having the Secret Service around at all times by establishing a “family zone” on the second floor of the vice-presidential mansion where they could eat meals and relax in private.³³

With a Democrat in the White House, and majorities in both houses for the first time since Jimmy Carter’s presidency, the Clinton-Gore administration aimed to end legislative gridlock. Their first hurdle was the federal budget and its runaway deficits. President Bush’s attempt to restrain the deficit by raising revenue had violated his “no new taxes” pledge. Clinton had promised a middle-class tax cut, but faced projections of deeper deficits than expected. Vice President Gore sided with the “deficit hawks” who convinced Clinton to abandon middle-class tax cuts in favor of a tax increase for the wealthy. Republicans adamantly opposed any raise in taxes, and conservative Democrats complained that Clinton muddied the waters by simultaneously proposing an economic stimulus package with spending increases. Clinton and Gore vigorously lobbied congressional Democrats. In the House, they won by a single vote. In the Senate, a 50-50 split allowed the vice president to cast the tie-breaking vote. The economy recovered, the federal budget was balanced, and surpluses replaced deficits.³⁴

Within the administration, Gore became the voice of standing firm. He counseled the president for the need of more self-discipline in his remarks, his programs, and his behavior. As “senior staffer,” he

attended every meeting, involved himself in every decision, and stood at the president's side on every formal occasion. When others counseled compromise, Gore urged decisive action. Clinton commented that "Al is always on the side of encouraging me to do what I think is right." Others in the administration grasped the closeness of Gore's relationship to Clinton, and whenever they feared that the president had gotten off track, they talked with the vice president. Clinton liked to say that he had the most powerful vice president in history.³⁵

At public events, Gore's inclination to position himself next to Clinton sometimes made him seem glued to the president's side. The *Washington Post's* White House correspondent Ann Devoy wrote that Gore "doesn't speak. He hardly moves. He is just there, frozen." Always well-briefed, Gore had studied political science models of the vice presidency and had drawn from them a model of the vice president as a general adviser to the president, who took little direct responsibility over specific programs. For that reason, Gore declined to head Clinton's task force on health care reform, believing that it would consume all of his attention. Instead, Gore instead chose to lead the administration's "reinventing government" initiative.³⁶

Inspired by political scientist David Osborne's book, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, Gore took on waste, fraud, and abuse in the federal government and advocated trimming the size of the bureaucracy and the number of regulations. Following a pattern set during his years in Congress, Gore held town meetings with federal employees to explain his objectives and listen to their suggestions. He consulted with cabinet secretaries on ways to streamline their departments. He appeared on late-night television, wearing safety goggles and smashing

an ash tray with a hammer to poke fun at the Pentagon's requirement for an expensive "ash receiver, tobacco, desk type" that would break into fewer than thirty-five pieces. After a six-month study, Gore and Clinton stood together on the White House lawn in September 1993, with two forklifts piled high with federal regulations. Gore's report, *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less*, made 284 recommendations for paring down and re-energizing the bureaucracy. Implemented by executive order and legislation, the proposals reduced the federal workforce by a quarter of a million jobs, to its lowest level in forty years.³⁷

Gore received further attention from his televised debate with Ross Perot over the merits of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. The agreement between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, had been negotiated by the Bush administration, but it was left to the Clinton administration to usher it through Congress. Members were divided between those who favored freer trade and those who feared it would cost jobs and hurt the environment. In the debate, Gore pointed out that Perot had profited from a "free trade zone" run by the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, and asked, "If it's good for him why isn't it good for the rest of the country?" Public opinion polls showed that Gore had won, and that a majority of Americans now supported NAFTA.³⁸

Internationally, Gore was quicker than Clinton to advocate the use of military force in world trouble spots. While the president pondered what to do about the worsening crisis in Bosnia, the vice president pointed to a front page picture in the *Washington Post* of a twenty-one-year-old refugee who had hanged herself in despair. "My twenty-one-year-old daughter asked about that picture," said Gore. "What am I supposed to tell her? Why is this happening and we're not doing anything?"³⁹

Clinton had promised to fix the nation's health system, and believed that the best chance to pass a health plan would be early in his administration, before it became wrapped up in another election. The administration offered a complex health care package that confused rather than solidified public opinion. Clinton's failure on health care, and a number of other stumbles, galvanized Republicans in the congressional elections of 1994. House Republicans drafted a "Contract with America" that converted local elections into a national campaign and picked up 52 seats in the House, where Republicans won the majority for the first time in forty years. In the Senate, Republicans claimed a 52-48 majority. For Gore, the most distressing news came from Tennessee, where Republicans won both Senate races. Fred Thompson took the seat that Gore had once occupied, and Dr. William H. Frist defeated Senator James Sasser.⁴⁰

Resuming Relevancy

The president had to scramble to reestablish his "relevancy" to governance as congressional Republicans, led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, launched an ambitious budget-balancing, tax-cutting drive. Republicans had the votes to pass bills, but not to override vetoes. To press the president into cooperation, the new majority forged a reconciliation bill that paid for a reduction in taxes by cutting farm programs and Medicare. If the president vetoed the bill, they warned that it would shut down much of the federal government. Speaker Gingrich assumed that when faced with such a "train wreck" scenario, the president would back down. But Gore insisted the administration would have to stand and fight sometime, and should do so from the strongest possible position. "What do we defend?" Labor Secretary Robert Reich asked. "The high ground," Gore replied. In November, Clinton vetoed a stopgap spending

bill that temporarily shut down the government. In December, he again vetoed appropriations that sent “nonessential” government workers home and suspended many government operations. The public blamed Congress, and Clinton emerged from the confrontation rejuvenated.⁴¹

Everyone took it for granted that Gore would again be on the Democratic ticket in 1996. The Clinton-Gore team won 49 percent of the vote to 41 percent for Republican Bob Dole and 8 percent for Ross Perot. As the automatic front-runner for the Democratic nomination in 2000, Gore had developed a reputation as a remarkable fund raiser, until embarrassing questions surfaced. It was revealed that Gore’s appearance at the Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles had generated campaign donations, despite a federal law that prohibited fund raising at tax-exempt institutions. Gore’s insistence that he had been unaware of the fund raising, caused columnist Mary McGrory to wonder how the “best-briefed man in Washington” could have gone so uninformed. Damaging charges appeared the following March in a front-page exposé by the *Washington Post’s* investigative reporter Bob Woodward, who revealed that White House staff had dubbed Gore the “solicitor-in-chief.” Woodward documented fifty-two calls that Gore had made on White House phones to raise nearly \$800,000 in contributions. Gore’s attorneys assured him that no court had ever ruled such actions illegal. At a press conference, the vice president said that “no controlling legal authority” had barred him from doing it, but his repetition of that phrase seven times made it appear that he was hiding behind the legal jargon. No formal charges were brought, but the incident shook his straight-arrow public image.⁴²

Gore’s problems were soon overshadowed by news that President Clinton had carried on an affair with a former White House intern. Special prosecutor Kenneth Starr, who was investigating other

allegations against the president, accused Clinton of lying under oath to a grand jury about the affair. Clinton privately assured the vice president that it had not been a sexual relationship, and Gore loyally supported him. “He is the president of the country! He is my friend,” Gore told an audience at the University of Illinois. “I want to ask you now, every single one of you, to join me in supporting him.” Eventually, Clinton admitted that he had lied about the “inappropriate relationship.” Starr filed a voluminous report with the House of Representatives, which instituted impeachment proceedings. Public opinion disapproved of the president’s personal behavior but regarded impeachment as an overreaction. Rather than gain votes, as Speaker Gingrich had predicted, Republicans lost seats in the 1998 elections, and Gingrich resigned from Congress. During a lame duck session, the House impeached the president in a largely party-line vote. Gore appeared publicly with the president at the White House to call it “the saddest day I have seen in our nation’s capital because today’s vote in the House of Representatives disregarded the plain wishes and goodwill of the American people.” Gore, who stood to gain from Clinton’s removal, defended the president. “I’ve defined my job in exactly the same way for six years now,” Gore said: “to do everything I can to help him be the best president possible.” Clinton won acquittal in the Senate.⁴³

In December 1998, Albert Gore, Sr. died at the age of ninety, and the vice president delivered a moving eulogy at his funeral. “My father was the greatest man I ever knew in my life,” Gore declared. He had made many tough decisions in politics, but he could always “come home and explain to his children what he had decided and why.” Those with strong fathers learned trust early on, said Gore; “that their needs will be met; that they’re wanted; that they have value. They can afford to be secure and confident.

They will get the encouragement they need to keep on going through any rough spots they encounter in life. I learned all those things from my father. He made all the difference.’⁴⁴

During the remainder of his term, Vice President Gore’s most dramatic public action was a last-minute flight to the environmental summit in Kyoto, Japan, where he broke a logjam in the discussions by pledging that the United States would cut carbon dioxide emissions and encourage greater energy efficiency. The agreement would have placed greater restrictions on developed rather than developing nations. It was highly unpopular in the American business community, and the U.S. Senate had already urged the administration not to sign the treaty unless all nations were held to equal standards. Gore kept the treaty alive in Kyoto, but there was no chance of its survival in the Senate, and the treaty was never submitted for approval.⁴⁵

The Disputed Election of 2000

Gore approached the election of 2000 with name recognition and fund-raising advantages, a head-start on organization, and eight years of on-the-job experience. He could claim that the country was enjoying peace and prosperity, which usually favored the incumbent party. Gore defeated former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley in the primaries, but his campaign tripped over some structural issues that led to a change in directors and a shift of its headquarters from Washington to Nashville.⁴⁶

“I am who I am,” Gore said in an interview. “And I’m old enough now to know that there are some things that are not going to change.” Still, he continued to tinker with his public image, switching from his habitual blue suits to casual earth tones. There was nothing inherently wrong with adjusting one’s style, but doing it too often gave the impression of someone uncomfortable with himself. Gore also displayed a

curious habit of exaggerating his accomplishments—such as his assertion that he “took the initiative in creating the Internet”—which his opponents exploited for their own purposes. “He never seemed to be telling the truth,” observed the conservative commentator Tucker Carlson, “even when he may have been.”⁴⁷

The Clinton scandals contributed to Gore’s decision not to give the president a role in the 2000 election, and to his choice of Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman for his vice presidential running mate. The first Jewish candidate on a national party ticket, Lieberman had been outspokenly critical of the president’s moral lapses. Although Clinton wanted to help elect Gore president, Gore kept the president at a distance, just as he had kept his father on the sidelines during his congressional campaigns.⁴⁸

The presidential election of 2000 featured the sons of two prominent political fathers. George W. Bush, the son of former President Bush, was serving his second term as governor of Texas. Polls showed the electorate evenly divided. Two minor party candidacies were potential spoilers. News commentator Pat Buchanan won the nomination of Ross Perot’s Reform party, and Ralph Nader headed the Green party. Both gained only tiny percentages of the votes nationwide, but Nader’s candidacy cut into Gore’s environmentalist constituency.⁴⁹

Gore’s unease in the public eye and his difficulties in defining himself became evident during three televised debates with Bush. Facing the affable Bush posed the problem of how to take the offensive without appearing “excessively negative.” In the debates, Gore sounded better informed, but Bush appeared more at ease. Gore adjusted his tactics, and afterwards campaigned more aggressively, telling audiences: “I’m fighting for you!”⁵⁰

Two states became focal points: Tennessee and Florida. Bush made repeated forays into

Tennessee. Campaigning in Chattanooga, he taunted: “My opponent vows to carry his home state. He may win Washington, D.C., but he’s not going to win Tennessee!” On election night, Bush won the state by 51 to 47 percent. Had Tennessee’s eleven electoral votes gone to Gore, they would have made him president.⁵¹

Both camps counted Florida as essential to victory. Television news first called Florida for Gore but then pulled the state from his column and awarded it to Bush. Nationally, Gore ran over a half million votes ahead in the popular vote and helped Democrats gain seats in both the Senate and House, but Florida enabled Bush to win a majority of the electoral votes and therefore the presidency. Gore called the Texas governor to concede and then went to meet his supporters at Nashville’s War Memorial. Before he could make a public statement, however, he received urgent messages that Bush’s lead in Florida had narrowed to the point where a recount would be automatic. Gore called Bush back to say that he was putting earlier plans on hold. “Let me make sure I understand.” Bush replied. “You’re calling back to *retract* that concession?” “You don’t have to be snippy about it,” said Gore. It was not clear that he had lost Florida, “and until it is clear I can’t concede.”⁵²

Bush and Gore each took 48.8 percent of the Florida vote. Pat Buchanan received less than 18,000 votes in the state, while Ralph Nader got 96,837, or 2 percent of the total vote cast. Florida also discounted 175,000 improperly-cast ballots, which came disproportionately from African-American districts. Outdated equipment and poorly designed ballots were faulted. Some counties in Florida used new optical-scan machines, while others used decades-old punch cards, lever machines, and paper ballots. Confusing “butterfly” or “caterpillar” ballots—where names of candidates were listed on multiple pages—also

made it hard for people to be sure they had voted for the candidate of their choice. Some ballots were disqualified for "overvotes," selecting too many candidates, while others had incomplete punches such as dimples and "hanging chads." The automatic recount did not re-evaluate the discounted ballots, and on November 26, the Florida Secretary of State certified that Bush had won the state by 537 votes. Bush accepted the results and appointed a transition team. Gore demanded a hand count. The election was not yet over.⁵³

Working on a laptop out of the Vice President's mansion, Gore gathered the latest political reports and plotted his legal and political strategy. *Gore v. Harris* went to the Florida State Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously in Gore's favor for a full statewide review of all the "undercounted" ballots. Bush's attorneys appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which on December 12, ruled 5 to 4, in *Bush v. Gore*, that insufficient time remained to conduct a recount that would not violate the equal protection clause of the Constitution. The majority had all been appointed by Republican presidents, leading Gore's supporters to call the ruling more political than judicial. One of the dissenters, Justice John Paul Stevens (also a Republican appointee) wrote angrily: "Although we may never know with complete certainty the identity of the winner of this year's presidential election, the identity of the loser is perfectly clear. It is the nation's confidence in the judge as impartial guardian of the law."⁵⁴

For the first time since 1888, the winner of the popular vote had lost the electoral college and the White House. On the day after the Supreme Court's ruling, Gore announced that while he disagreed with the decision, he would accept it. An independent Florida Ballots Project conducted by the National Opinion Research Center later concluded that even if the Supreme Court had allowed the statewide

recount to be completed, Bush would have won by a slim margin of 493 of the ballots that could be counted..⁵⁵

As the outgoing vice president, Gore presided over a joint session in the House chamber where he counted the electoral ballots and declared George W. Bush duly elected. In the Senate, he swore in both his running mate, Joseph Lieberman (who had campaigned simultaneously for the Senate and the vice presidency), and Hillary Rodham Clinton, the new senator from New York. When he received a standing ovation from the galleries, Gore noted that “boisterous demonstrations” went against Senate rules.⁵⁶

Returning to private life, Al and Tipper Gore wrote a book on the state of family life in America, *Joined at the Heart*. Reviewers suggested that the new book could be “read as part of a platform that the Gores will be advocating in one form or another, proposing a different approach in the ‘family values’ debate.” But by then, terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 had transformed the political landscape. President Bush’s campaign to combat terrorism and protect homeland security significantly increased his popularity. Gore supported the war effort in Afghanistan, but also gave speeches critical of the administration’s policies, seemingly in preparation for a rematch in 2004. The news media showed little enthusiasm for another Bush-Gore contest. “Somewhere along the line,” commented ABC News’ political director Mark Halperin, reporters had turned negative toward Gore. “Within the subculture of political reporting, there was almost peer pressure not to say something neutral, let alone nice, about his ideas, his political skills, his motivations.” If Gore intended to run again, he would need to overcome negative preconceptions, but readjusting his style and his message would only open him to renewed charges of reinventing himself.⁵⁷

In December 2002, Gore hosted the popular television program *Saturday Night Live*, where he won plaudits for his relaxed, humorous performance. Media critic Tom Shales wrote that the program showed him “being lighter and lither than usual—quicker on his feet and with the quips, a big amiable, Gore-next-door.” The next evening on news program *60 Minutes*, Gore announced that he would not be a candidate for the Democratic nomination for president in 2004. To run again would have put the “focus on the past,” he said, instead of the “focus on the future I think all campaigns have to be about.” Withdrawal garnered Gore the best press that he had gotten in years. Commentators praised his decision and the style in which he had handled it. In stepping aside, Gore recalled that after his father had lost in 1970, they had canoed on the Caney Fork River and mulled over his political future. When Albert Gore, Sr. complained, “You serve 32 years in the Senate and the House and this happens and what do you do?” Al Gore, Jr. had replied, “I’d take the 32 years, Dad.” Now as he reviewed his own public career of eight years each in the House, Senate, and vice presidency, he decided that he would “take the 24 years.”⁵⁸

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